

Modernity

Science, Social Science



Marshall Berman describes modernity as “ a mode of vital experience— experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today” (Berman, 1982). It encompasses social changes, the way these changes are experienced and the reflection of these experiences in various circles. It is a world of definition and ambiguity, of static definitions and constant change. Berman says modern humans “ are moved at once by a will to change ... and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart” (Berman, 1982). Change frightens us even as we long for it. “ To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. ... It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead” (Berman, 1982).

In capitalistic society, it is argued that the consumer is the master by reason of making the choice to purchase or not purchase. Berman says this is not really the case. Availability of options only begins the list of restrictions. “ Poor people cant get lawyers in a country that is glutted with them; the HMOs have abolished the autonomy of physicians; college professors are often glorified fundraisers” (Hitchins, 1999).

The World Trade Center of New York City is an architectural example of the modern. Berman describes it as “ isolated ... it gave off hostility” as compared to the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings. “[The Port Authority’s] idea of safety involved repelling the people. The slab shape ... grew out of an aesthetic voiced best by Le Corbusier, who said that in order to have modern planning we have to ‘ kill the streets.’ For him the street epitomized disorder

and chaos” (Berman, 2002). By contrast, the Battery Park City Complex was also designed by the Port Authority, yet invited people to come in and stay awhile. Although the city is perceived as a melting pot, Berman points out that it also presents “ an endless series of completely sterile and empty gigantic spaces all over the world” (Berman, 2002).

With our shift into the cities, the constraints of time we’d known in rural settings shifted. No longer were our days ordered by the sun, they were compartmentalized into working and non-work times in terms of hours and minutes. Yet, whether at work or at play, we can’t help but allow each to spill into the other. Innovations in technology now demands immediate message responses, having the effect of erasing time even while maintaining its importance.

Modernity is defined by a contradictory set of ideas that constantly shifts and changes even while remaining the same. As people are learning to interact within this modern environment, these contradictions are so ingrained that they are not apparent. Therefore, as Berman said, “ To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction” (Berman, 1982).